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ABSTRACT

During the 1960s, efforts to improve fairness, accuracy, quality, and responsiveness led to the introduction of ombudsmen on many American newspaper staffs. Representatives for readers' complaints and in-house critics of their own paper's performance, ombudsmen frequently use columns, internal memoranda, staff contacts, questionnaires, and speeches to fulfill their obligations. While the use of ombudsmen in the United States appears to be steadily increasing, questions on the position's effectiveness have been raised. Specifically, critics suggest that (1) ombudsmen frequently are required to perform so many duties--answer complaints, research problems, and write articles--that they have difficulty doing any job adequately; (2) the danger of a conflict of interests arises when staff members are expected to criticize the organization that pays them; (3) ombudsmen cannot develop an objective perspective when they are also required to work as reporters, as often happens on small newspapers with low budgets; (4) internal critics can lower the general staff's morale; and (5) editors can perform the ombudsman's job more effectively. Supporters suggest that editors are neither as accessible to the public nor as impartial as ombudsmen. Recognizing the need for this impartiality, major television networks have recently instituted the ombudsman position. (MM)

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THE OMBUDSMAN AND THE NEWS MEDIA

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION CENTER REPORT NO. 479

This report was written by Kay Hudgens, a master's candidate at the University of Missouri School of Journalism.

In his memoirs, noted New York **Times** columnist Arthur Krock described one of his toughest early jobs at the New York **World**. The job was titled "Assistant to the Publisher," but it entailed much of the function of today's press ombudsman. Joseph Pulitzer had instructed Krock to be a critical observer and follow up on the daily product of the **World**. "But what Pulitzer really wanted and expected of me," Krock wrote, "was 'to ride herd' on (editor) Herbert Swope!"

Krock's task was made difficult by Swope, who, when criticized, "either roared me down or managed to disparage my qualifications to evaluate what he was doing." Nor was this critic's post appreciated by other staff members, including editorial page editor Walter Lippmann, general manager Florence White and manging editor John Tennant.

Krock eventualy decided his biggest problem was that "in assigning me to 'ride herd' on Swope, (Pulitzer) had given me only the saddle. Swope had the horse. . . ." After three years, "Pulitzer demoted me in a move cloaked in lavish praise to a minor executive position."[1]

Krock's stint as an in-house critic differs from today's ombudsman in theory: The ombudsman is meant to 'ride herd on behalf of the reader rather than the publisher. But many ombudsmen could relate to Krock's predicament of sitting in a saddle with no horse or, at least, lacking reins. And the worst hurdle for many today remains weathering the reactions of hurt or resentful staff members.

In its purest sense, the term "ombudsman" means an independent official who investigates citizens' complaints against acts of the government buraucracy and recommends censure or remedy. Sweden developed this intermediary role in the 1760s, and the concept permeates their society today. The United States adopted the idea in less formal ways, mostly for non-governmental bodies and especially for private businesses and public universities.

In the U.S. press, the term ombudsman refers primarily to a newspaper staff member who acts as the readers' representative for complaints and as an in-house critic of the paper's performance. An aggrieved reader can call the ombudsman to obtain explanations of the newspaper's policies, receive answers about specific stories and seek corrections for inaccuracies and misconceptions printed in the newspaper.

The ombudsman count at the end of 1982 shows 25 ombudsmen working for 30 newspapers, some of them under joint ownership. At least three newpapers have started but discontinued the position.

THE NEED

In 1947, the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press, a group of prominent non-journalists gathered by magazine publisher Henry Luce to study the status of press freedom in the United States, sent a challenge to the industry — monitor yourselves or be monitored by government.

The commission said the press was failing its duty to fully present the day's news and represent all sectors of society. It called on the press to, among other things, assume the responsibilities of a common carrier and engage in vigorous mutual criticism.

"One of the most effective ways of improving the press is blocked by the press itself," the commission report stated. "By a kind of unwritten law the press ignores the errors and misrepresentations, the lies and scandals, of which its members are guilty."[2]

The nation's press, on the whole, did not take kindly to the commission's critique, although thoughtful press leaders continued to discuss the issues raised, and some minor improvements were made. But it was not until the 1960s that newspapers made substantive efforts to be more responsive. That decade, one of national turmoil and bad news,

Summary:

The debate over the need for an ombudsman in the news media was sparked off by the Hutchins Commission's recommendation that the press monitor itself or be monitored by the government. Nearly 40 years later, the debate rages on.

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seemed to sharpen readers' doubts about the credibility and intentions of the press.

Journalism critic Ben Bagdikian, writing for **Esquire** magazine in 1967, said the press had not kept up with a readership that was more knowledgeable and involved in community and national affairs than ever before.[3]

Editors and publishers apparently saw the problem for themselves and instituted a number of reforms still in use today, including local press councils, standing corrections columns and accuracy checks sent to persons mentioned in news stories.

An important innovation born during the 1960s was the press ombudsman.

OMBUDSMAN FOR THE PRESS

Two men, Ben Bagdikian and A.H. Raskin, have received the credit for raising the discussion of the press ombudsman to the level of serious debate and sparking one newspaper into action.

In the same article in which he criticized the unresponsiveness of the press, Bagdikian accused newspapers of "riding a tide complacent in their monopoly status without making basic reforms that they and the readers deserve. Some brave owner, someday," he predicted, "will provide for a community ombudsman in his paper's board, maybe a non-voting one, to be present, to speak, to provide a symbol and, with luck, exert public interest in the ultimate fate of the American newspaper."[4]

Three months later, Raskin followed up more specifically. As with Bagdikian, Raskin found much to fault in his business. The biggest problem with newspapers, he wrote in the **New York Times Magazine**, was "the unshatterable smugness of their publishers and editors, myself included. . . . The press prides itself on the rigor with which it excoriates malefactors in government, unions and business, but its own inadequacies escape both its censure and its notice. . . . There is a disturbing skepticism among large groups of readers about whether what they read in their newspapers is either true or relevant."[5]

Raskin saw the need at every paper for a "Department of Internal Criticism to put all its standards under re-examination and to serve as a public protector in its day-to-day operations."[6] He believed this department could "check on the fairness and adequacy of their coverage and comment. The department head ought to be given enough independence in the paper to serve as an ombudsman for the readers, armed with the authority to get something done about valid complaints and to propose methods for more effective performance of all the paper's services to the community . . . ."[7]

SOME BRAVE OWNER

Action first came not from Raskin's own New York **Times** (a paper that still opposes the idea of an ombudsman), but from Louisville, Kentucky's sister papers, the **Courrier-Journal** and the **Times**. Eight days afer Raskin's suggestion was published, the papers' executive editor, Norman Isaacs, distributed a memo to the staff explaining that John Herchenroeder would assume the ombudsman function for readers. He was to investigate complaints and suggest corrections where warranted. He would improve contacts with the public and provide the policing Raskin had suggested, Isaacs said of the new staff position.[8]

Isaacs called the new post a product of evolution at the paper. He and publisher Barry Bingham Sr. had been trying without success to muster community interest in a news council. "The Raskin idea offered a way to monitor the paper — and instantly," Isaacs recalled in an interview ten years later.[9]

Herchenroeder received about 400 complaints from readers the first year. Assessing the program after nine months, he wrote in an inter-office memo, "I know that our readers realize this is not just a publicity gimmick and that we have accomplished some real, solid rapport with our readers and have eliminated some of the misunderstandings that inevitably arise."[10]

Herchenroeder held the post for 12 years before retiring. He was replaced by Frank Hartley, who retired after three years. The current Louisville ombudsman is Robert Crumpler, another long-time **Courier-Journal/Times** man. In addition to sending out daily reports to the staff on readers' responses and complaints, Crumpler writes a monthly critique of grammar and usage, labelled "Crumpets."[12]

GROWTH AND DIVERSITY

John Herchenroeder was the nation's only press ombudsman until 1970, when the Washington **Post** named assistant managing editor Ricahrd Harwood to the task. But the **Post** took the concept a step further. Harwood was both a reader's representative and a media critic and columnist. He did well enough at the latter to win the 1917 George Polk Memorial Award for criticism.

Between 1970 and 1983, at least 31 additional newspapers added full- or part-time ombudsmen to their staffs. Several subsequently dropped the position. Papers with ombudsmen are listed below by the years they began their programs:[12]

1967, Louisville **Courier-Journal** and **Times**,
1970, Washington **Post** and Salt Lake City **Desert News**, (discontinued),
1971, St. Petersburg (Fla.) **Times**, (discontinued),
1972, Milwaukee **Journal**, Minneapolis **Tribune** and Delaware **News-Journal**,
1974, Norfolk **Virginia-Pilot** and **Ledger-Star**,
1975, San Diego **Union**, Boston **Globe**, Sacramento **Bee**, Port Huron (Mi.) **Times Herald**, (discontinued) and St. Louis **Post-Dispatch**,
1976, Honolulu **Advertiser**, Arizona **Daily Star**, and Jacksonville (Fla.) **Journal** and **Times-Union**,
1977, Seattle (Wash.) **Times** and San Diego **Evening Tribune**,
1979, New Jersey **Home News** and Binghamton (N.Y.) **Press** and **Sun Bulletin**,
1980, Cape Cod **Times**,
1981, Philadelphia **Inquirer**, Cincinnati **Post**, Alexandria (Va.) **Gazette** and Santa Anna (Calif.) **Register**, and
1982, Kansas City (Mo.) Star and **Times**.

Other ombudsman papers with starting years not avail-

able are the Cincinnati **Enquirer** and the Dayton (Ohio) **Journal Herald**.

Keeping track of U.S. press' ombudsmen is made more difficult by the differing interpretations newspapers give the term. When George Beveridge began as omudsman at the Washington **Star**, he "learned early the futility of looking elsewhere for a precise mold for the job; the personalities, the problems, the drives of each paper define how each ombudsman operates."[13]

Major differences occur over the amount of independence provided by management, number of hours spent on the job, freedom from other editorial duties, and publication of a critical column. But three generalizations can be made about the ombudsman's role at all papers:

(1) It focuses the correction and response mechanism on one person. (2) It provides the reader with a more convenient way to register complaints. Most ombudsmen answer their own phones or return calls from answering services or tapes. (3) It produces reports to the staff on what the public is saying, in order to bring about corrections and improvements and, in some cases, an in-house critique of the paper.

What probably is the most comprehensive study of press ombudsmen to date was completed in August by University of Nevada graduate student Kathie Hoxsie. She used extensive survey questionnaires and interviews over a two-year period to produce a thesis titled, "The Role of the Ombudsman on Newspapers in the United States and Canada." The study provides statistics on the characteristics, functions and attitudes of 26 ombudsmen. It portrays the average ombudsman as a 51-year-old male with more than 25 years of newspaper experience and a salary of more than $30,000.[14]

It is easier to describe the average ombudsman than to describe the average function of an ombudsman. Hoxsie listed five functions and asked the ombudsmen to rank them in order of their importance to the job. The rankings varied greatly by individuals, but the pluralities placed the correction of errors as the most important function, followed in order by internal criticism, media criticism, public relations (including speeches and articles), and special projects (defined as compilation of special information for management). Hoxsie was careful to note that the rankings measured only the values attached to the functions, not their actual performance.[15]

THE LONELY UNITE

One group with a special interest in Hoxsie's results were the members of the Organization of Newspaper Ombudsmen, (affectionately pronounced Oh NO!) The organization heard the researcher summarize her findings at its third annual meeting last May in Washington, D.C. A founding ONO member, former Minneapolis **Tribune** ombudsman Richard Cunningham, explains that he and others formally organized the group because "we all felt very lonely; it's quite an independent position." Now an associate director of the National News Council, Cunningham offers three more specific purposes behind the founding of ONO: "It seemed valuable to get together and cross-fertilize ideas about some of the problems we were facing individually. Establishing some standards. . . and being available to spread the word to interested papers were also things we talked about."[16]

Ombudsmen can join ONO by paying $25 in annual dues. Members communicate loosely among themselves for advice on particular issues. Otherwise, the only group-wide publication has been an occasional newsletter from former president Al Jacoby, readers' representative at the San Diego **union**. Newly elected President John Brown, of the Edmonton (Canada) **Journal**, probably will continue the informal approach followed to date.

At the 1982 meeting, the ombudsmen accomplished one of their goals by adopting a set of principles and guidelines. The underlying principles of the job were: (1) The ombudsman must be independent, and that independence must be real; and (2) He or she should be answerable only to the person with the highest authority over the news department (either the top editor or publisher).

ONO listed four objectives of an ombudsman: (1) Improve the fairness, accuracy and accountability of the newspaper; (2) Enhance the paper's credibility; (3) Strive to imprive its quality; and (4) Make the newspaper more aware of the concerns and issues in the community.

The organization then listed six duties of an ombudsman: (1) Represent the reader who has complaints, suggestions, questions or compliments; (2) Investigate all complaints and recommend corrective action when warranted; (3) Alert the newspaper about all complaints; (4) Serve as in-house critic; (5) Make speeches or write to the public about the newspaper's policies, attitudes and operations; and (6) Defend the newspaper publicly or privately when warranted.

Finally, the guidelines offered five means an ombudsman could use to fulfill his or her responsibilities: (1) A column; (2) Internal memoranda; (3) Staff contacts; (4) Questionnaires; and (5) Speeches.[17]

Former President Al Jacoby says there was little disagreement over the guidelines. "We began work on them earlier and discussed them throughout the year," he says. "By the time of the meeting, we all pretty much agreed."[18]

WRITING THE COLUMN

The ombudsman's column is a disputed function of the job, though most ombudsmen do write one. Nineteen of the 26 ombudsmen surveyed by Hoxsie said they wrote columns, 16 on a regular basis.

The nation's first ombudsman first started without a column, and his paper continues to follow that policy. "I didn't think we should air things in public, and I didn't think the public would be interested," John Herchenroeder said.[19] His successor at Louisville, Frank Hartley, has said he didn't write a column because management didn't want him to.[20] The current Louisville ombudsman, Robert Crumpler, says he doesn't write a column because of tradition.[21] However, his weekly column sometimes does discuss the ombudsman's findings.

Another ombudsman who doesn't write a column, John Clancy of the Philadelphia **Inquirer**, told Hoxsie he didn't think columns were "wise or appropriate. Most I have seen seem to lead to self-praise."[22] An outspoken critic of the whole idea of ombudsmen, Robert Haiman of the St.

Petersburgh **Times**, says many columns read like sob stories. "We work so hard, and have more alcholism, more spastic colons because of the pressure, etc.," Haiman mimics. "If you want to be an apologist, be one; but don't call it an ombudsman," he says.[23]

Papers that do carry regular ombudsman columns consider them essential to the job. The column makes the ombudsman more visible and thus more promptly answers telephone calls from readers. It also shows the paper is interested in airing its dirty laundry and helps the reader to understand how the paper functions and why mistakes in judgment and accuracy occur.

Thor Severson, formerly an ombudsman for the Sacramento **Bee**, advises others to write regular columns in order to forge a strong link with the public. San Diego's Jacoby took his advice and reported that his weekly column made him "very effective. People knew who I was, they reacted, they called me. They knew there was somebody to go to."[24]

Unfortunately, there is little research about how much the columns are read by the public. Yet one of the Washington **Post**'s best known ombudsmen, Charles Seib, seemed confident he had an audience. "One reason for doing this," he said of the weekly column, "is because of the public's interest in the press and the public's desire to know more about it."[25]

The third group, those who write only occasion columns, includes one of the newest in the group, Donald Jones of the Kansas City **Star** and **Times**. He told Hoxsie he decided against a regular column because "it seemed prudent not to make commitments I couldn't keep," and because "ombudsmen who get to writing regular columns get a little fluffy." He said he planned to write "when I have something to say."[26]

THE MEDIA CRITIC

Some of the ombudsman columns, especially at larger newspapers, branch into media-wide issues and criticism beyond the specifics of the papers. Ben Bagdikian says this dual role of handling complaints and being a thoughtful critic is too much for one person. Writing in 1972, he suggested that a paper of any size wishing to do a complete job "should have one person handle all complaints, with the inevitable research that it requires, and someone else to write press criticism."[27] Contrary to the way most ombudsmen would affix the labels themselves, Bagdikian would give the ombudsman title to the critic.

Bagdikian explained that time was the crucial factor. "A real critic," he said, "has to take time to read not only his own paper with care — which in a major paper takes a long time — but also other papers, magazines and the growing journalism literature."[28]

Bagdikian said that during the nine months he served as ombusdman for the Washington **Post**, he spent 30 to 40 percent of his time receiving and investigating complaints. The **Post**'s current ombudsman, Robert McCloskey, says he feels stretched by the dual role, too. He spends most of his day at his desk, answers his own phone and has no staff. He receives about a dozen letters and up to 20 phone calls a day. "I handle reader complaints, and where there is something inaccurate or unfair, I try to get clarification or correction," he says, adding that he dutifully listens to the circulation gripes he feels are out of his realm.[29] McCloskey estimates two-thirds of his columns focus on specific reader-complaint issues, and says he thinks of himself more as an ombudsman on the reader's behalf than as a critic.

In performing the criticism function, McCloskey thoroughly examines the **Post** each morning, then tries to read at least four other papers to compare coverage. He writes an internal memo almost daily calling attention to errors and problems he or a reader has noticed.

McCloskey says the scope of **Post** coverage gives him more latitude for addressing larger issues. "The enormous amount of space . . . on national and international news opens up more opportunity to enter opinions on weight and placement of stories," he says. The complaints the **Post** receives, in themselves, offer a springboard for broader discussion.

The **Post**'s ombudsman, then, is fulfilling what one informed media watcher has described as the "overburdened formula of news critic and ombudsman combined in one resident nipper,"[30] and he appears to be more reader's representative than critic.

LOUISVILLE, AGAIN

The first brave paper to name an ombudsman was also the first to take Bagdikian's advice and add a separate critic's position. In 1974, the Louisville **Courier-Journal** and **Times** unleashed Robert Schulman and his "In All Fairness" columns twice-weekly on the editorial page of the **Times** and monthly in the combined Sunday paper. "The belief at the Louisville dailies," Schulman wrote two years into the job, "is that nothing seves the credibility and fairness-seeking reputation of newspapers quite so well as an independent reviewer of the authenticity of the product."[31]

According to Schulman, Louisville publisher Bingham guaranteed him space on the editorial page and expected him to be critical of all the media, including the two dailies and the newspaper-owned television station **WHAS**. Schulman applied his criticisms to editorial pages as well as news.

Schulman retired from the papers in March 1981 and moved to New York to work as managing editor of "Inside Story," a public television series that discusses and criticizes the news media. No new critic was hired by the papers when he departed. The managing editor does discuss the newspaper industry in a Wednesday column but, in Schulman's assessment, it is primarily promotional in nature.

Bingham afforded Schulman another forum, however, when the critic returned to Louisville in September 1982. **WHAS-TV** carries a weekly critique of local media titled "Minding the Media," in which Schulman can still find fault with the newspapers.

Looking back on his eight years as a newspaper columnist and critic, Schulman says he can state unequivocably that

he was allowed complete freedom. even when critical of Bingham. The lack of interference from management, he adds, was balanced by the "rumbles and grumbles from lesser editorial and reporting positions."[32] Clearly, Bingham gave his critic both the horse and saddle needed to "ride herd."

No other paper is known to have taken Bagdikian's idea of the internal and external critic as literally as Louisville, but many papers probably could argue they filled both functions by hiring a critic and making other efforts to fulfill the ombudsman's fucntion of fielding reader complaints.

One such paper is the Chicago **Tribune**, whose media observer once wrote that through his column and the newspaper's commitment to acknowledging and correcting errors, the readers were well-served. It was not necessary, he added, "to have an individual in the newsroom wearing an ombudsman label or a sign that said, 'I am Mr. Fair Play.' "[33]

CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS

A major problem for ombudsmen who act as more than mere conduits for complaints is posed by their paychecks. Critics question how an ombudsman can be independent and act on a reader's behalf when the paper is paying that person and could fire him or her anytime.

The Washington **Post**'s editor Ben Bradlee tried to fund an ombudsman position through private foundation funds to avoid such a conflict. But, as Bradlee relates, the foundations did not care to subsidize a profit-making newspaper. Instead, the **Post** began hiring its ombudsmen by contract as an incentive for management to retain independent-thinking gadflies. In the early years of the w**Post**'s program, Bradlee had reserved the right to kill an ombudsman's column. McCloskey says such is not the case today, that no one but the editorial page editor sees the ombudsman's columns before they run.

Other newspapers try to protect the integrity of the position by guaranteeing space for the columns and maintaining a "hands off" policy, except for minor editing changes.

One of the noblest of the nation's ombudsmen arrangements can be found at the Alexandria (Virginia)**Gazette**, the oldest continuous daily newspaper in the country. The paper's ombudsman is Jim McElveen,a former journalism professor at the University of South Carolina and newspaper publisher, who now works as director of public affairs for the National Cable TV Association in Washington D.C. McElveen has complaints, letters and phone messages forwarded to him and regularly checks in with the **Gazette**.

McElveen says he has an oral agreement with the paper's publisher, who gave him carte blanche to cover the local and national press as he saw fit. What makes the situation even more attractive to the publisher and the public is that McElveen works free of charge. Asked if he were performing his ombudsman's role for the good of journalism, McElveen responds modestly, "I guess so. It's one of those things I do."[34]

In addition to avoiding a monetary conflict of interest, the agreement in Alexandria skirts other major obstacles to ombudsman independence — the emotional and peer pressures that come with criticizing fellow staff members, and conflicts faced by those critics who also hold editorial jobs at their papers. America's prototype ombudsman, Herchenroeder, has said that expecting an ombudsman to accept editing and reporting assignments from a paper is "like having the pitcher and catcher call the balls and strikes."[35]

Two former Washington **Post** ombudsmen, Bagdikian and Seib, advise against pre-publication input from an ombudsman. Seib viewed himself as a "professional outsider, the customer's rep, and I make it my business not to know what's happening in the newsroom," he told an interviewer in 1979.[36] Bagdikian says an ombudsman must stay out of the decision-making process on stories or policies to preserve his ability to evaluate the news product objectively. "There is always value in having someone look at it without the emotional attachment of paternity," he said in a recent telephone interview.[37]

INSIDE OR OUT

The issue of independence also raises the question of whether an ombudsman should be selected from within the paper's own staff or brought in from the outside. Insiders already know the ropes; outsiders bring fresh perspectives and no personal allegiances.

The Washington **Post** has gone both ways. It appointed its first three ombudsmen — Richard Harwood, Bagdikian and Robert Maynard — from its own editorial employees and lured its fourth, Charles Seib, from its rival, the Washington **Star**. The most recent two came from outside the paper's staff. William Green came from Duke University. His successor, McCloskey, came from a foreign service career. McCloskey was a State Department spokesman for ten years and, prior to accepting the **Post**'s offer, was U.S. Ambassador to Greece.

Bagdikian left his job as the **Post**'s ombudsman under a cloud because of conflicts between editor Benjamin Bradlee and himself. Bagdikian later complained that management wanted to restrict his role to criticising only the staff, and not management policy.[38]

When Bagdikian left, he urged his successor, Robert Maynard, to ask for a contract that specified the duties of the job. Bagdikian still insists that short-term, non-renewable contracts help to insure an ombudsman's independence, but admits there is a shortage of experienced and knowledgeable press critics willing to change jobs every few years. He has suggested that journalism professors and senior professionals from other newspapers use leaves of absence as time to be critics in different cities.[39]

Al Jacoby, a seven-year veteran San Diego ombudsman, is convinced it's better to move an experienced staff member into the slot. "That person understands how the paper operates and knows its nooks and crannies," he says. A staff member is less likely to be awed or dominated by older staffers and can more easily spot errors in the paper because he knows the community well, Jacoby adds.

Jacoby says there is a certain independence afforded by an outsider with a contract, but adds he has never had a con-

tract or felt pressured because of it. "My attitude is that planes, trains and buses leave this town every day," he says. "I could always find another job."[40]

THE LARGE AND THE SMALL

For smaller papers who cannot find a free-of-charge ombudsman with the experience of a Jim McElveen, money remains an obstacle to establishing a truly independent position.

A case that has drawn frequent criticism is that of Ann Farrow at the Cape Cod **Times**, circulation 43,000. Farrow admits she lacks the independence of a true ombudsman and refers to herself as a reader-access person with many additional duties.

Writing for the **ASNE Bulletin** in 1981, she asked "When is an ombudsman not an ombudsman? About four-fifths of the time when she is editing copy for the Sunday department and the lifestyle desk, assembling a daily feature package, organizing the weekly books page and generally pinch-hitting in a busy newsroom."[41] She added, "What was heralded in May 1980 as an ombudsmanship has become a reader-access column," largely because the public criticism function was too painful a process. "I'm allowed to say 'I disagree,' but not 'we were wrong'. "[42]

Farrow offered a recent example in which she thought the paper had goofed and said so. The **Times** heard from older readers after it published a photograph of children playing leap-frog over tombstones in a local cemetary. Farrow agreed that the photograph was in poor taste and included the criticism in her column. "It's not that we are out to protect public morals," she explains, "but the paper almost condones something like that by printing it."

Lacking editorial independence, yet still performing a limited critic's function in some columns, Farrow is filling a position whose parameters are not fixed. "I guess I'm not really sure how I see myself," she said. "That's one of the problems with the column."[43]

STAFF REACTION

"Newspapermen are notoriously sensitive to criticism," Charles Seib wrote, "particularly to criticism in print. They can dish it out, but they are not very enthusiastic about accepting it."[44]

Seib was not making a startlingly new observation about the press. Prominent journalism critics have noted the hypocritical lack of graciousness much of the press exhibits when it is corrected or scolded. Aggressive media critic David Shaw discovered in his work for the Los Angeles **Times** that newsmen are not very good at answering questions about their work. He concluded "editors and reporters are not one whit better than politicians, crooks, businessmen, athletes, doctors, or lawyers when it comes to dealing with the press. They are guarded, suspicious, and quick to tell me 'no comment,' 'I was misquoted,' 'I was quoted out of context,' or 'I didn't realize I was being interviewed'. "[45]

With such a track record, newspaper staff members were bound to have problems with ombudsmen. In the few studies undertaken of staff reaction, staffers indicate overall positive feelings about the post; or, at least, they recognize its value. But ombudsmen consistently report that, as Robert McCloskey quickly learned, ruffled feathers are part of the job. "Reporters are good at running around demanding answers to their questions," McCloskey says. "But they are not so good at answering them. Often when a reporter sees an ombudsman coming toward him, he assumes an attitude of confrontation."[46]

It is easy to understand why a reporter at a paper with an ombudsman may be uneasy. A reporter's errors and shortcomings could show up in inter-staff memos, in public columns and, at some papers, in confidential reports to editors. Paranoia is a not unreasonable response, although a more positive way to say it is Jacoby's comment — "It makes the staff perpetually aware . . . ."[47]

Robert Haiman, executive editor for the St. Petersburgh **Times**, complains that an ombudsman creates confusion and frustration for reporters. Reporter see their stories advance through various levels of editing without question, only to be criticized by an ombudsman after publication. It raises the question: Just who is in charge?[48]

The most painful aspect for staff members is to be included in a critical public column. One ombudsman dropped the column started by his predecessor because it had zapped reporters' morale and reduced productivity. The columns had been specific in assigning blame. "One of our employees would read that column and his whole day would be shot," the ombudsman said. "We could not get any production out of him."[49]

Learning from past mistakes, most of today's ombudsmen center their columns on issues and practices rather than specific personalities because, as the **Post**'s Maynard wrote, "it's rare that an individual's efforts survive as individual efforts." Maynard describes the process in which "the managing editor is probably living at the reporter's elbow throughout; then the copy desk must have its say; perhaps the news desk has made a few suggestions — and all along the reporter's original idea has been modified or amplified." Maynard said he tried to judge the performance of the collective institution.[50]

To lessen bad feelings among staff members, Bagdikian has suggested that reporters be given a right-of-reply when they feel they are unfairly judged in a column.

Kathie Hoxsie surveyed willing staff members at the San Diego **Union** and tallied an overall positive response to the ombudsman concept. But there were complaints that criticisms from Jacoby were nit-picking, that they made too much out of minor incidents or errors.[51]

Ironically, another study, one conducted in 1973, polled staffers at the St. Petersburgh **Times** and concluded that employees generally seemed to support the concept.[52] That paper eliminated its ombudsman program seven years later after a column aroused serious resentment among reporters. The ombudsman had questioned the paper's practice of sending black reporters to cover news in black communities. The reporters involved said the column cast doubt about their professional abilities.[53] When Executive Editor Robert Haiman instructed ombudsman Dorothy Smiljanich to either apologize or quit, she took the latter option. The **Times** then dropped the position entirely. Haiman later said

the ombudsman position at his paper was never meant to provide an in-house critic, but only a reader-access person.[54]

ANSWERING THE CRITIC

Debate on every aspect of the ombudsman role shows that what critics view as faults often are considered to be benefits by supporters. The paranoia and morale problems noted by critics, for example, are defended as a healthy dose of accountability for an egotistical profession.

Critics call ombudsmen a cop-out for editors who don't want to deal personally with readers, while supporters counter that the ombudsman is more convenient and consistently responsive for readers.

One ombudsman, Wilson Barton of the Trenton (N.J.) **Evening Times**, once turned the "go-between" argument on its head by writing that "taking reader or advertiser pressure off the newsroom is the highest service an ombudsman can perform . . . giving writers and editors a fighting chance to produce the best copy possible, thus hoping to avert as much as possible or to build the solid base needed to defend newsroom perfomance against outside criticism."[55]

The most outspoken opponent of ombudsmen, Robert Haiman, says that at the St. Petersburgh **Times**, proper editing now fulfills the ombudsman's functions. "We are talking every day and reviewing and looking with a critical eye," he says, adding that the same process occurs at the Louisville papers that have an ombudsman.

Haiman adds that good editors answer their own phones and handle complaints themselves. When his paper dropped the ombudsman position in 1980, he says, he told the paper's switchboard to refer complaints to him. "Someone with a complaint should be calling the editor. Now I hear from readers," Haiman says. "And with respect to changing that image of newspapers as large, stone buildings, readers have been astonished and delighted to actually talk to an editor in person."[56]

Haiman's "good editors" argument has drawn an angry and amused response from other editors and ombudsmen. The Washington **Post**'s William Green once said in a heated panel discussion that Haiman "represents the worst arrogance in the business."[57] The executive editor of the Louisville **Courier-Journal**, Paul Janensch, said the newspaper business would be better off with fewer executive editors and more ombudsmen.[58]

Al Jacoby has gone on record labelling Haiman's argument "pure unmitigated bullshit. Have you tried to call an editor recently?" he asks. "See if you're not sloughed off to someone else. If you call the city desk, you may get a reporter, you may get an assistant, you may get a copy kid. How any of those people handle your complaint will depend on that individual that day."[59]

Haiman's response: "That may be true at the San Diego **Union**, but it's not true at the St. Petersburgh **Times**."

THE FUTURE

Though the fire under the press ombudsman movement has always flickered rather than roared, it has grown steadily in its first 16 years. That so few papers have dropped their programs is a good sign of the value of ombudsmen. It appears that those papers that have dropped the position have dispersed the ombudsman's duties to other staff members and are operating with a heightened awareness of accountability to the public.

At the end of her two-year study, Kathie Hoxsie predicted that existing ombudsman programs would improve and that more ombudsmen would be appointed "as the ombudsmen themselves clarify their role and as journalists and readers gain greater understanding and appreciation of the concept."[60]

At the National News Council, Richard Cunningham sees a refinement process under way for ombudsmen. He believes they will be discussing journalism issues as concepts, as occurred when the Janet Cooke incident sparked numerous columns about the use of unidentified sources. "There will be more such discussion and clarification," he says.[61]

The Organization of Newspaper Ombudsman should be an important forum for hammering out inconsistencies of the program. It might also forward ideas on such questions as how to increase an ombudsman's editorial independence and how smaller papers can fulfill the reader's representative and critic functions with limited resources.

Perhaps one way to lessen confusion about the role of ombudsmen is to retire the Swedish word. It never truly fit in the first place and has been stretched and adapted by each new application. What remains important is to capture what Jacoby calls the "spirit of ombudsmanship." Surely the reader-complaint mechanisms are an important part of that spirit — a prompt and honest effort to correct all errors and misunderstandings.

Even more important to meeting the challenges of the Hutchins Commission, Bagdikian and Raskin, is the function of thoughful press criticism. Efforts to establish such self-monitoring help newspapers in two ways, according to the national press ombudsman of Sweden, Thorsten Carrs. First, it helps to preserve and deepen public confidence in newspapers and journalists. Second, it reduces the risk of the press losing its legal freedoms. "As the freedom of the press is a vital precondition for the preservation of democratic government, the Press Ombudsman indirectly plays an important role in a democratic society," said Carrs.[62]

BROADCAST OMBUDSMEN

The most important recent development for media ombudsmen involves broadcasting, where two of the three major commercial networks have named officials to "ride herd" on their news teams. The first newtwork to do so was

ABC. In May 1981, George Watson, vice president of televison news coverage, added to his job description the tasks of handling viewer complaints and monitoring the news for quality and fairness. Watson is executive producer of "Viewpoint," a quarterly program intended to provide "a forum for people who took issue with specific ABC reports or who wanted to express their opinions about the fairness and accuracy of TV reporting in general."[63]

Writing in the New York **Times** in August 1982, Watson discussed the negative feelings toward television news being expressed in poll after poll by the public. The institutions and individuals who have been scrutinized by network news are fighting back in more sophisticated ways, he wrote, and are revealing embarrassing episodes and techniques used by journalists.

Watson called for greater self-criticism and responsiveness to viewers. To protect its First Amendment freedoms, he said, "TV news needs to debate its rights and responsibilities. And that demands a great effort to provide an attentive ear and open mind to the public's concern and criticism."[64]

At CBS, Emerson Stone has been named vice president for news practices. According to Stone, that network's executives had talked about adding an ombudsman-like position for several years, but final action was precipitated by controversy generated by a CBS documentary on Vietnam. The network has acknowledged it broke some of its own standards in the preparation of "The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception." The central target of the documentary, General William Westmoreland, sued the network for $120 million.

Stone says he will be analyzing the CBS news product both on his own and in response to critics. He also will listen for grammar and usage problems in broadcasts.

Neither Stone's nor Watson's positions have been well-advertised to the public, and aside from ABC's "Viewpoint" program, there are no regular broadcast outlets that parallel ombudsmen's columns in newspapers.

But that may change. As Watson wrote, "The TV equivalents of op-ed pages and letters to the editors need to be developed . . . out of a recognition that its critics deserve a forum."[65]

NBC News has not yet provided a counterpart to the other networks moves. Stone says NBC denies the need for any such effort. "We used to," he adds. "We used to say, all you need is editors. We've since come to believe a second look is a good idea."[66]

FOOTNOTES

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